DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 987 TM 029 650

AUTHOR	Calkins, Lucy; Montgomery, Kate; Santman, Donna
TITLE	Helping Children Master the Tricks and Avoid the Traps of Standardized Tests. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-TM-99-01
PUB DATE	1999-04-00
NOTE	4p.; Adapted from "A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests. Knowledge Is Power" by Lucy Calkins, Kate Montgomery, and Donna Santman, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0032
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, 1129 Shriver Laboratory, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 (free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Reading Skills; *Reading Tests; *Standardized Tests; *Teaching Methods; Test Coaching; *Test Wiseness
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This Digest lists some of the common mistakes made by young readers and suggests teaching strategies that may be useful to teachers who are preparing their classes to take standardized tests. Children must learn to use the text to pick the answer, rather than relying on memory, especially when the story is a familiar one. Teachers can help students learn to look through the text and can provide practice opportunities with easy or familiar text in a format that resembles that of the test. Teachers can also help students create a context for words that may be on a test by relating those words to their own experiences. Learning to read the questions accurately is important, as is practicing choosing the answer based on the true meaning of the questions. Teachers should also advise students not to overlook an answer choice because it contains an unfamiliar word. Students can also be taught to check their answers without reviewing every single response. In addition to teaching students these strategies, teachers need to set a positive tone for the day of the test. (Contains four references.) (SLD)

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Lucy Calkins
Kate Montgomery
Donna Santman

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TM029650

ERIC Digest EDO-TM-99-01

April 1999

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Helping Children Master the Tricks and Avoid the Traps of Standardized Tests

Lucy Calkins, Kate Montgomery, and Donna Santman

Adapted with permission from A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Reading Tests: Knowledge is Power (1998) by Lucy Calkins, Kate Montgomery, and Donna Santman, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Introduction

Children can improve and change their test-taking habits if they are taught about their misleading work patterns. Teaching children about the traps they tend to fall into may well be the most powerful, specific preparation teachers can give them for the day of the test. By studying the habits of young test takers, we uncovered some of their common mistakes. This Digest lists some of these mistakes and suggests several teaching strategies that may be useful to teachers who are preparing their class to take standardized tests.

Use the Text to Pick Your Answer

When it comes to choosing an answer, many children are much more likely to turn to their own memories or experiences than to the hard-to-understand text for their answers. This issue becomes even more difficult when the passage is an excerpt from a text with which the students are familiar. Many new reading tests use passages from well-known children's literature, including those stories that have been made into movies. In this case, many students justify their answers by referring to these movies or their memory of hearing the story when they were younger.

While these personal connections are helpful if the student is at a complete loss for an answer, it's essential for children to understand that relying on opinions, memories, or personal experience is not a reliable strategy for finding answers that a test maker has decided are correct. Clearly, many questions asked on the tests require prior knowledge to answer, but the problem comes when students rely exclusively on that prior knowledge and ignore the information presented in the passage. Some things that teachers may wish to do in order to help their students avoid making this mistake include the following:

- Teach students to underline parts of the passage that might be asked in the questions
- Help children develop scavenger-hunt-type lists of things to look for as they read the passages by having them read the questions first
- Teach students to find out how many questions they can hold in their minds as they read the passage
- Show children how to fill in all the answers on each test booklet page before filling in the corresponding bubbles on the answer sheet
- Teach children ways to mark the passage in order to make it easier to go back to find or check specific parts – these include writing key words in the margins and circling or underlining
- Show students how to use an index card to block out distracting print or to act as a placeholder
- Retype familiar or easy text to look as daunting and dense as the test passages to give children confidence and experience in the test format.

Sometimes It's Helpful to Refer to Your Own Life Experiences

In the reading comprehension sections of a reading test, children must find evidence in the passages to support their answers. Yet, there are parts of many reading tests where the only things students can rely on are their own previous experiences. In these sections, students are asked to choose the correct spelling of the underlined word or to choose the word whose meaning is closest to that of the underlined word.

Often students prepare for these sections of the tests by taking practice tests and then going over the answers. However, it is highly unlikely that any of the same words would appear on the actual test. Therefore, teachers may wish to impress upon children the importance of creating a context for the variety of words that may be found on the test by relating those words to their own personal reading experiences. In order to facilitate that thinking process, teachers may wish to help children ask themselves such questions as "Have I seen this word before in a book?" "Where have I heard that before?" or "What words or events usually happen around this word?" while they are answering vocabulary or spelling questions.

Learn to Read the Question

It is always assumed that if children have reading troubles, their wrong answers stem from difficulty reading the passages. However, this is not always the case.

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Sometimes, reading the questions, a much less familiar task, can prove to be the greatest reading challenge for the students. This is because questions such as "How was the central problem resolved?" or "Which statement is NOT true about the narrator?", are not the types of questions children are asking themselves and each other about the books they read.

Studying various types of questions can be a helpful practice to future test takers. This can be done by searching through practice tests and making lists of the types of questions. Although the questions will be different on the day of the test, this exercise may familiarize students with the types of questions that are asked on standardized tests.

Choose the Answer to the Question

Sometimes children choose their answer by finding the first answer choice that matches something in the text. Unfortunately, by not considering what the question was actually asking, they are tricked into choosing the wrong answer simply because it may state a fact that was included in the story.

One teaching strategy that can help students avoid this mistake is to present a text with questions in a standardized test format. With a partner, the child should figure out what the different questions are asking, and write down their paraphrased versions. Many times children will be surprised at how different their paraphrasing is from what the question is actually asking. It may be a good practice for teachers to look at the different paraphrasings with the class and discuss which interpretations would help the members of the class and which would lead them astray. This allows students to strengthen their skills at finding the true meaning of the questions.

Risk an Unfamiliar Choice

Frequently, students avoid choosing an answer simply because it contains an unknown word even when they know the other choices are probably wrong. Thus, teachers should advise students not to overlook the possibility that the answer which contains the unfamiliar word may be the correct choice. Teachers often try to teach children a way of narrowing down the answer choices through a process of elimination. Despite the fact that this process can be very helpful, many students eliminate two possibilities and then, from the last two, just sort of pick one. They don't, it seems, try to figure out a reason to choose one over the other. They seem to wrongly assume that the two choices left are equally possible. However, teachers should teach students that thoughtful elimination between the two last possibilities can lead to the correct choice.

Check Your Answers

After the harrowing ordeal of taking a standardized test, the last thing that students usually want to hear coming from their teacher is "Did you check your answers?" Frequently, the biggest reason kids hate checking answers is because they have only one strategy for doing so: opening their test booklets to the first passage and beginning again. To them, checking answers means taking the test again. However, that does not have to be the case. There are a variety of different strategies that students can use for selectively going back through the test and reconsidering answers. One of these strategies is teaching children to only check the problems of which they were unsure. It is unnecessary to return to questions about which students feel fairly confident. Students can keep track of the troublesome questions while they are actually taking the test. They can do this in several different ways: jotting down the numbers of the questions on a separate sheet of paper, circling the numbers in the test booklet, etc. Students should also know that it is okay to take a short break (stretching in their seats, bathroom/drink break) before going back and checking the answers. This will give them a chance to clear their minds a little bit. Most importantly, students should be taught to attempt to check the answers to the troublesome questions using a new strategy so that they may avoid reusing possibly faulty problem-solving methods.

Setting the Tone for Test Day

Although teachers may do their best to prepare their students for standardized tests, every teacher has stories of children dissolving into tears on the day of tests. Even if their feelings aren't so obvious, all children feel the pressure of doing well. Be sure you don't add to the pressure by over reacting to small deeds of misbehavior or by over emphasizing the fact that today is a testing day.

Suggested Readings

Calkins, L., Montgomery, K. and Santman, D. (1998). *A Teacher's Guide to Standardized Tests. Knowledge Is Power.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract ED99CO0032. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the U.S. Department of Education. **Permission is granted to copy and distribute this ERIC/AE Digest.**